

## Translating The Bush Inaugural Address

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President George W. Bush's inauguration for a second four-year term marked a ritual familiar to Americans but often less well understood abroad. The scale of the ceremony, the parades, and the celebration are universally comprehended. But the language of the president's address to the nation invoked ideals that have deep roots in American life, and their historical context is well worth explaining, or "translating," for a much wider audience.

### Historical Precedents

Historically, the inaugural address provides a unique opportunity for a newly elected or re-elected president to go beyond political partisanship and the ordinary business of governance in order to speak to the entire country and to embody what President Abraham Lincoln in his first inaugural described as the "better angels of our nature." For generations, Democratic and Republican presidents have invoked the loftiest ideals in speaking about America's purpose, the religious foundations of these beliefs, and the indispensable role the U.S. plays, both as an example and in helping other peoples to achieve the fundamental ideals of freedom and democracy.

These beliefs reflect the uniqueness of the United States. Unlike most peoples of the world, Americans are immigrants or their descendants and are not unified by a shared ethnicity, race or national origin. Instead, to be American is to subscribe to the beliefs in democracy and liberty embodied in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights.

For example, in January 1961, President John F. Kennedy uttered these stirring words, "Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty." Two decades later, in January 1981, Ronald Reagan spoke of America as "the exemplar of freedom and beacon of hope for those who do not now have freedom." And Bill Clinton proclaimed in his 1993 inaugural that, "Our hopes, our hearts, our hands, are with those on every continent who are building democracy and freedom. Their cause is America's cause."

Each of these presidents invoked liberty as a God-given right, an idea that goes back to the original founding of the United States. As long ago as 1630, John Winthrop, an early spiritual leader of the Puritans, delivered a sermon calling upon his followers to create a "city upon a hill" as they prepared to land in Massachusetts. In 1776, an American revolutionary author, Tom Paine, wrote that, "We have it in our power to begin the world all over again." And President Reagan reached back three and a half centuries to describe America as a "shining city on a hill."

In short, throughout the centuries, American thinkers and presidents have not only viewed freedom and democracy as an example to other peoples, but have encouraged and supported those who suffer oppression and seek to free themselves.

## Understanding and Misunderstanding the Bush Speech

In his speech, President Bush proclaimed, "[I]t is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world." This statement embodies a key insight: real democracies do not make war on other democracies, nor do they nurture terrorists.

Yet some foreign observers have misunderstood or even distorted the meaning of this statement, claiming that it signals an imperial crusade to impose democracy by force. This kind of criticism not only provides an excuse for dictatorship and oppression, but it completely misstates the meaning of the Bush speech.

Indeed, the President made clear that, "This is not primarily the task of arms, though we will defend ourselves and our friends by force of arms when necessary ... America will not impose our own style of government on the unwilling ... Our goal instead is to help others find their own voice, attain their own freedom, and make their own way." The universality of this message is evident in the words, "America will not pretend that jailed dissidents prefer their chains, or that women welcome humiliation and servitude, or that any human being aspires to live at the mercy of bullies."

The President acknowledged that the "great objective of ending tyranny" is a long-term task, "the concentrated work of generations." Nonetheless, though the effort is often arduous, there have been considerable successes in widening the sphere of democratic countries during the past half century. In this process, the United States has often played an indispensable part in encouraging or helping others to free themselves and to establish or solidify free institutions and the rule of law. The list encompasses countries in many regions including, among others, Germany, Japan, Italy, South Korea, the Philippines, parts of Asia and Africa, most of Eastern Europe, much of Latin America, and in recent days Ukraine.

The words of once imprisoned dissidents, such as Natan Sharansky in the Soviet Union, Lech Walesa in Poland, and Vaclav Havel in Czechoslovakia, testify to America's importance in raising their spirits and reinforcing the determination of others like them in their ultimately successful struggles. Moreover, even where the task still remains hard and even dangerous, as in Afghanistan, the Palestinian Authority, and especially Iraq, the ouster of despotic regimes and the holding of free elections remain historic achievements.

## Ideals and Security in the Post-9/11 World

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, as well as the March 11, 2004 train bombing in Madrid, and attacks in Turkey, Indonesia, the Philippines and other countries are evidence of a deadly threat. The danger comes not only from fanatical terrorist groups, but from tyrannies that support terrorism as well as those that seek weapons of mass destruction.

As President Bush observed, "The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world." More specifically, as he added in a weekly radio address just two days later, "We will continue to promote freedom, hope and democracy

in the broader Middle East -- and by doing so, defeat the despair, hopelessness and resentments that feed terror."

In short, vital interests, ideals and security remain closely linked. Indeed, President Bush's words echo those of Woodrow Wilson, John Kennedy, Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan, as they confronted two world wars and the Cold War. Now, in the face of a new peril, the Bush inaugural is a bold restatement of American ideals at home and abroad. They deserve to be understood and valued for what they truly represent.

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